

David Simpson, *Iridescent Blue-Green*, 24" x 24" acrylic on canvas, 1989.
Courtesy Mincher/Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco.



Christopher Brown, *Blue Run*, 100" x 100" oil on canvas, 1989.
Courtesy Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

FOUR BAY AREA ABSTRACT PAINTERS

Rick Arnitz, *Paths of Glory*, 60" x 108" oil and enamel on canvas, 1990. Courtesy Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco.





Oliver Jackson, *Untitled Triptych*, 96" x 288" oil on linen, 1989. Courtesy Anne Kohs & Associates, Inc., San Francisco.

Mark Levy

"At a certain moment the canvas began to appear in one painting after another as an arena in which to act rather than a space in which to reproduce, what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

— Harold Rosenberg, 1952

"But a blissful sense of liberating non-objectivity drew me forth into the 'desert' (the black square on a white field) where nothing is real except feeling. And so feeling became the substance of my life. Suprematism is the rediscovery of pure art which, in the course of time, had become obscured by the accumulation of things."

— Kasimir Malevich, 1927

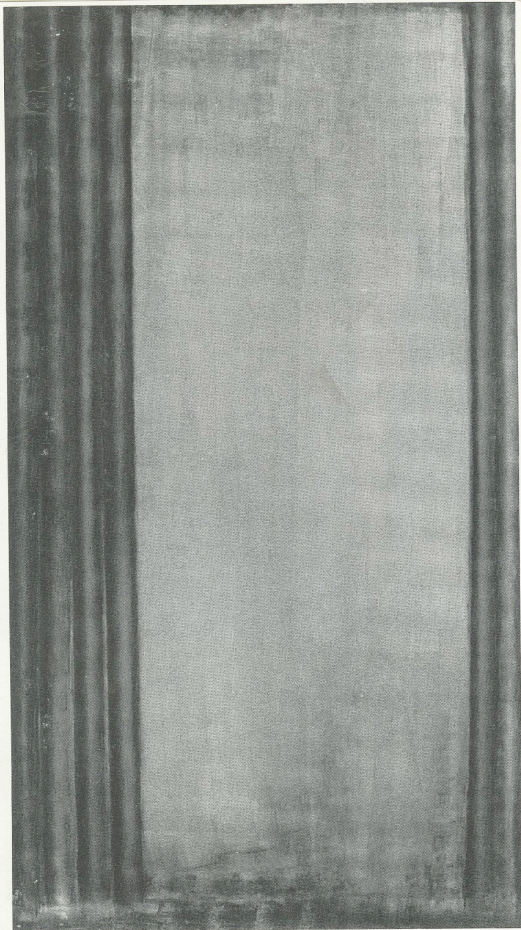
Abstract painting in the San Francisco Bay Area is replete with many approaches, ranging from minimalist to abstract expressionist. On one pole are the heirs of Malevich, exemplified by David Simpson's abstract geometrical color fields which evoke delicate sensations without explicit references. On the other end is Oliver Jackson's powerful action painting with its "paint people." And in between are the deliquescent mandarin subtleties of Chris Brown's abstract paintings with figurative elements and Rick Arnitz's more abstract shimmering surfaces with their associations of landscape. Indeed, Bay Area abstract painting not only embodies varying degrees of abstraction, but it is informed by a dialectic between reductionist and expressive tendencies.

In a written statement about his work, David Simpson has argued, "In speaking of visual art as language I do not mean it is so in the ordinary sense of something that simply imparts information. Rather, any given work should become an instrument which allows for a kind of communion with the viewer leading to contemplation. Again this is similar to what happens when listening attentively to a particularly loved piece of music. I am Utopian to the extent that I want my art to provide an alternative to life, rather than hold up a mirror to it."

Visual art, like music, has the capacity to directly affect the viewer without the baggage of representation. And pure abstract painting is uniquely situated to carry the viewer beyond the noise of ordinary existential reality to arrive at an ineffable state of bliss. For me, David Simpson's recent work approximates the experience of *samadhi* in which the meditator, in emptying out the contents of his or her mind, is filled with the energy of the void.

Although Simpson's monochromatic voids are resplendently colored with iridescent blues, crimson golds, iridescent blue-greens and so forth (these colors are also the titles of his paintings), and his surfaces are slightly textured, his paintings nevertheless convey the general sense of the void in *samadhi* which is often tinged and grounded with a particular mood, owing to the emotional condition of the meditator. The transcendent incandescence of Simpson's colors is the product of a careful process of scraping and troweling which effects a thin but extremely rich surface, and of mixtures of colors that do not appear in ordinary reality. Moreover, the square and tondo frames of the recent paintings provide an essentially disposable armature for the colors, one which does not interfere with the contemplation of the voids.

Like David Simpson, Oliver Jackson has strong feelings against representation. "The responsibility of the artist," he says, "is to give back not a reflection, but a sense of clarity about the spiritual state. The sense of reflectiveness is the most childish aspect of art." I think Simpson would also agree with Jackson's belief that, "the one thing that a visual work does if it's powerful is to get past the eyes. The one thing that a great aural work does is get past the ears — like Beethoven. If it doesn't do that, it will simply exist as a senseless possibility. But it will not be able to open you to the spirit. You must always move past the visual, and yet it is through the visual that you move. Therefore you walk a tightrope."



Rick Arnitz, *Long Look*, 90" x 50" oil and enamel on canvas, 1990. Courtesy Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco.

Jackson's idea of the spiritual greatly differs from Simpson's, however. His riotous displays of brilliant, juicy colors, choppy, swirling brushstrokes and abbreviated figures, letters, and symbols evoke ancient modes of dance, ecstasy and ritual. And it comes as no surprise that Jackson was influenced by the work of jazz artist Julius Hempel and other musicians of the Black Artists Group, of which Jackson was a member during the late sixties and early seventies in St. Louis; Jackson's painting is similar to the BAG musicians in its edgy rhythms and cultivated rawness. Jackson, like these musicians, takes his audience on a journey into the unconscious to uncover instinctual modes of feeling that may be highly unsettling. "I have drawn you into something that is fearful not to hurt you, but in the sense that you can see another mode," explains Jackson.

For all the primordial power of Jackson's best canvases, he is a consummate craftsman. "The painting has to be put together as perfectly as possible like any vehicle," he maintains. In fact, there is an inextricable unity between figure and ground, a seamless continuum of kinetic abstract expressionist brushwork that orders the apparently chaotic surface of Jackson's paintings.

Chris Brown also collapses the distinction between figuration and abstraction in his work. Although his recent painting is based on photographs of Civil War soldiers, the figures become forms emptied of content in the overall configuration of shifting luminous planes. In *Blue Run*, a group of unarmed soldiers, evenly dispersed throughout the painting, run to an unseen destination. By painting the soldiers from a high oblique angle, as though he was witnessing the scene from above, Brown eliminates their faces, preventing us from getting

psychologically involved with the soldiers. In the hands of an irreverent Brown, *Blue Run* — a deliberate pun on the bloody Civil War battle of Bull Run — becomes a group of blue soldiers running. Brown's lack of *gravitas*, however capricious, is fully in accord with the inclination to deconstruct meaning in postmodernist literature and art, allowing for free play of words and images.

In *Blue Run*, the blue soldiers create a kinetic zig-zag pattern which charges the watery, atmospheric field of pale Naples yellow and sienna patches that surrounds them. The figures also act as place markers for Brown's spatial maneuvers. It is difficult to tell, for example, the location of figures in relationship to the ground, as segments of the ground move forward to the picture plane while the surrounding figures are flattened out. This spatial gamesmanship brings to mind the Cubist painting of Picasso and Braque, who wished to affirm the claims of the two-dimensional picture plane over the traditional objective of representing three-dimensional objects in space. Like the Cubists, Brown takes painting as an object in itself, not merely as a vehicle to represent the world.

For Rick Arnitz, painting is a moral act — a courageous, yet inevitably flawed attempt to find meaning at a time when beliefs and ideologies have come to seem increasingly bankrupt. Yet painting can hold a measure of truth if it embodies the equivocal mood of this *zeitgeist*. "To paint legitimately is to paint ambiguously," claims Arnitz. And the artist's abstract fields of glowing colors express in elliptical terms the waverings between transcendence and materiality, joy and somberness, solipsism and social consciousness, that characterize our present slouch toward the millennium.

In *Long Look*, a series of dark brown vertical bars on both sides of the painting frame a vaporous zone of mottled yellow-oranges. This organization evokes the familiar motif in German Romantic painting of an open window in a dark, confined room, symbolizing humanity's longing for the spiritual infinite. Yet in Arnitz's painting, the "window," the lighter intermediate zone, is spatially ambiguous; it cannot be consistently read as a limitless horizon. It is as though Arnitz set out to escape the confines of everyday reality and ended up facing a wall. Indeed, the colors of the intermediate zone do not suggest the etherealized ambiance of ecstatic release; they are imbued with an almost material weight and density.

Paths of Glory is another of Arnitz's ironic titles. The painting to which it refers can be characterized as an irregular grid of horizontal reddish-brown lines or bars extending almost to the edge of the rectangular canvas. Is Arnitz raising a question about whether the painting of horizontal lines leads to glory in the art world? Needless to say, more than one artist has made a full career out of horizontal lines. To me, this questioning of motives, which also applies to Arnitz's own intentions, indicates an attempt by him to attenuate the formal grandeur and exquisite natural associations of this work by grounding them in a social and economic context. Partly because the horizontal bars in *Paths of Glory* do not seem fixed to the canvas, they appear to glimmer and meld in their hazy background, creating a visual sensation akin to the lapping of ocean waves on a dark, quiet night. Also, through the use of many layers of oil-based enamel paint, Arnitz is able to enhance the depth and mystery of his colors much like those in an Old Master painting.

Bay Area abstraction is richly pluralistic in style and embodies important ideas, as manifested by the four artists discussed here. David Simpson demonstrates how non-objective painting can be a vehicle for bliss. Oliver Jackson explores the relationship between abstraction and primal feelings. Christopher Brown validates and expands the legacy of Cubism. And Rick Arnitz reveals that abstract painting can legitimately be involved with moral issues. □

Mark Levy is a professor of art history at California State University, Hayward, and a contributor to many art publications and journals.